

May 2021

**Connected, Creative, Caring:
Australian Strategy for
International Education 2021-
2030**

ENQUIRIES
Katie Phillis
Head of Office
Office of Vice Chancellor

T: +61394792243
E: K.Phillis@latrobe.edu.au

A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

La Trobe University appreciates the opportunity to respond to this consultation on a new Australian Strategy for International Education for the next decade. We particularly welcome the recognition that this is an important juncture to rethink Australia's international education priorities despite the current *National Strategy for International Education 2025* still not having fully run its course.

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to the sector. This, coupled with a number of already-existing issues such as the escalating risk of foreign interference, shifting trade and diplomatic relations and internal questions about the balance of international and domestic students within Australia's public universities mean that a well-thought strategy for the sector is indispensable.

In Section B, we outline the priorities for a new Australian international education strategy. **Our key recommendation is that the response to the impact of COVID-19 should be the immediate priority of the strategy.** The strategy should also take a broader perspective of the role that international education should and could play within Australia's broader foreign engagement. It should propose more effective strategies to convey to the broader public the multi-faceted benefits of international education to Australia, a message that should be echoed by government and community leaders.

We acknowledge that diversification, be it across source countries or in modes of delivery, must be an essential component of the new strategy. Indeed, with the right support to ensure quality and cost-effective pricing, Australian institutions could continue to innovate and broaden their online study delivery and gain competitive advantage in key markets. Yet, we must not forget that for many international students, just like for the Australian students who pursue study overseas, an immersive, face-to-face educational experience is more attractive. Post-study working rights are a clear pull factor for international students. Their careful calibration and alignment with the skilled migration program would go a long way towards addressing areas of skilled workforce shortages in Australia. La Trobe fully supports existing settings which provide more favourable post-study working rights for students undertaking study in regional universities though further efforts will be needed to ensure adequate regional employment opportunities.

La Trobe looks forward to working with all relevant stakeholders to ensure that Australia preserves its reputation as a global destination of choice for international students and that the Australian community continues to derive the full economic, social and multicultural benefits of international education.

B. RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1. What are the key priorities for a new Australian Strategy for international education?

La Trobe is of the view that the following priorities should be included in a new Australian strategy for international education:

The impact of COVID-19

- Acknowledge the significant economic impact and revenue loss that COVID-19 has had on and will continue to have on the Australian international education sector while borders remain closed to international students and identify strategies to quickly respond to the observed shift away from Australia to alternative destinations including Canada, the UK and to a lesser extent the US;

- Acknowledge and work in the plan a strategy for similar future 'black swan' events which could have an impact on the sector including specific events in one or more key source countries or in a key area of delivery. COVID-19 has exposed the extent to which the sector and the country was unprepared for a major disruptive event;
- Outline a plan of recovery for Australia's positioning and perception in the market post-COVID border lockdowns;
- Address and commit to a plan for recovery of onshore study which has been severely compromised by COVID-19;
- Outline a plan for Australia's post COVID-19 migration program and the future of skilled migration via international education;

Market diversification

- Clearly articulate the expectations around market diversification and how this can be achieved and supported through the student visa program and advise on the parameters around regular review of the student visa program;
- Clearly articulate the expectations around diversification of international student subject preferences and the driver to build load in areas such as engineering and health;
- Provide clarity of vision around innovation in relation to digitisation;
- Explore the potential of online delivery to widen the market for international education and the way the Council of International Education will support institutions to effectively offer this service to students;
- Acknowledge the importance of institutional innovation, particularly around changing current service offerings to include hybrid learning and micro-credentialing and what support will be required for institutions to adapt to these new methods of learning;

Broader foreign relations and international engagement

- Fully acknowledge the impact of other Australian government actions in the area of foreign relations particularly those impacting universities such as the newly-legislated Foreign Arrangements Scheme (FAS) on the international education sector as a whole. The international education strategy does not exist in a vacuum but in the broader jigsaw of Australia's foreign and trade policy framework.
- Be holistic in its scope to include both international students studying with Australian institutions and commitment to ensuring Australian students undertake overseas experiences; and
- Recognise the soft power that international education brings in diplomatic engagement and, as part of a broader campaign, communicate the related benefits to the wider public.

2. Students should be at the centre of the new Strategy. How can Australian education providers deliver the best possible student experience both now and in the future?

We encourage a strategy that provides a framework to assist in ensuring international students receive a world-class experience studying at Australian institutions regardless of their location and/or mode of study.

However, it is important to note:

- While innovation is critical in offering different modes for study, research suggests that degree seeking international students will continue to seek face-to-face study experiences. This is not only for the classroom learning experience but also for the direct engagement with Australian students and culture. It is critical for both the international and the domestic student experience as well as for the Australian economy that institutions continue to offer face-to-face delivery.
- In terms of online learning, we believe there are a number of issues to be considered:
 - Online learning is limited in the connectedness and cultural understanding a student can expect to achieve in comparison to a student who is physically studying, living, and engaging directly within a host culture. Online learning is also a barrier to further development of English language competency. For this reason, the option of face-to-face delivery must remain.
 - That said, online learning is a cost-effective and preferable mode of study for some international students with limited opportunities to travel and/or relocate. If Australian institutions can continue to innovate and offer quality online learning experiences for international students at a cost-effective price, we believe online study delivery will be a competitive advantage in key markets if quality can be ensured and offered at a cost-effective price point.
 - It is important that two key elements are incorporated into an online strategy to help positively impact international students' perception of online study. These are:
 - Incorporating intercultural values, competencies and skills into course development to ensure a similar inclusive and culturally diverse environment that students would usually receive while studying in a physical classroom; and
 - designing international experiences for all students into course, in a way that prepares them for professional life and citizenship in a globalised world.

3. What changes are needed to make Australia more globally competitive over the next decade?

- i) **Policy and regulatory flexibility are important in enabling providers to innovate. How can we utilise these settings to pursue opportunities, and in what other ways can we work together to ensure Australia remains globally competitive?**
- We understand that globally there is a skills gap caused by new technologies meaning that companies are increasingly considering candidates from non-traditional paths. Trends coming from the US, UK and other key markets indicate that the traditional three- or four-years Bachelor's degree may not be as relevant to future employers as they once were. With the launch of many platforms such as Google releasing micro-credentialling and customise learning sites, it is evident that institutions must adapt and innovate to stay competitive.

- To become globally competitive, Australia should consider taking micro-credentialing, hybrid learning, online delivery and targeted short courses more seriously as the need for bite-size chunks of education meets three emerging macro-trends namely:
 - The need for high-quality tertiary education in developing societies;
 - The digital transformation that is taking place in many industries which is exacerbating the traditional skills gap; and
 - The need for people to continuously upskill but not having enough time in their working lives and personal commitments to attend a physical campus.
- Another needed change sits with the student visa and post study work visa program. **These programs are perhaps the most significant regulatory triggers related to Australia’s international education competitive edge globally.** The visa program needs to be reviewed frequently, particularly as it relates to employability profile building and migration opportunities, in order to compete with Canada, UK and the USA, which under the Biden administration appears more open to flexibility in migration settings.
 - Regarding the existing visa settings, **La Trobe strongly supports the recent changes to the program which provide more favourable post-study working rights for international students studying in regional Australia.** Although the real impact of these changes is hard to gauge given the disruption caused by the closure of international borders due to COVID-19, certainly at La Trobe we could see that there was an increased interest through the 2020/21 period for study on our regional campuses. Naturally, since these students’ interest is driven by the post-study work rights incentives, some of them will not be accepting their offers until there is certainty that they will be able to take advantage of the post-study working rights onshore in Australia.

4. How can providers, governments and stakeholders work together to achieve diversification opportunities (for example of disciplines, source countries, study destinations and delivery models)?

Diversification opportunities should have a foundation in clearly identified skills shortages and knowledge capital requirements both nationally and internationally. Identification of these needs will naturally inform diversification of disciplines, source countries and delivery models.

With the focus and championing of online learning, hybrid models and targeted short courses, more discussions and connections between industries, government and institutions are needed where on the job learning is part of the curriculum. A potential multisector partnership or collaboration could be one way of maximising diversification opportunities as well as building capacity to support change, knowledge sharing and to shape the future of international education nationally.

Source countries

When it comes to diversification of source countries in particular, it is important to recall that Australian universities have been seeking diversification for at least a decade. **However, with China and India being the**

world's two most populated countries (almost 40% of the world's population¹) and with their existing strong demand for international education, it is virtually impossible to avoid the market being dominated by these two players. For instance, in the past few years, La Trobe managed to successfully diversify away from the largest source country (China) and increased its intake of students from India. This however meant that La Trobe was exposed to fluctuations in the Indian market. The impact of this diversification will potentially only really be felt now while India experiences a devastating second wave of COVID-19 and while there is considerable uncertainty regarding when normal travel to and from India will resume.

La Trobe would also caution against a public narrative which implies that having a lot of students from these two countries is sub-optimal or not ideal. This is hardly conducive to improving the national population's perceptions of the crucial importance of international education and enhancing the sector's social licence, a point which is further addressed under Question 7.

5. What are the necessary skills for the future that students should be prepared for?

i) How can Australia improve employability outcomes for international students, ensuring they have the necessary skills to compete in a globally competitive labour market?

La Trobe is of the view that more can be done from a Government perspective, including through government incentives, to encourage Australian and multi-national businesses with operations in Australia to develop and support graduate placement for international students. This would contribute to ensuring that the academic discipline-related career development needs of new graduates are supported.

As an example, Destinations Australia provides for up to four years Post-study working rights which is a clear incentive for international students who are attracted to post-study options. However, it is important to make sure that international students have adequate access to employment in regional areas. For instance, an internal La Trobe analysis in 2020 looking at undergraduate and post-graduate prospective students from China, India, Indonesia and Vietnam found that students perceived that there were less employment opportunities available in smaller cities and regional towns in Australia and listed this perception as their number one barrier. Similarly, on the employers' side, there may need to be further incentives (as well as a cultural shift) regarding the suitability of international students and work eligibility for students on post study work visas.

To ensure that La Trobe students graduate with the skills needed to be successful in a post COVID-19 world – one where there is a greater importance place on the adoption of new technology and significant changes to the way we live and work - the following skills and competencies are built into all new course delivery:

- Analytical thinking and innovation
- Active learning and learning strategies
- Complex problem-solving
- Critical thinking and analysis

¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-country/>

- Technology design and programming
- Resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility

In summary, it is critical that institutions, industry and governments work together to ensure that courses are built for students to adopt the necessary skills needed to compete in a globally competitive labour market.

6. How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience?

i. What is our value proposition for both international and domestic students?

Australia is a safe study destination with a reputation for high quality education delivered in a multicultural setting with increasing work integrated learning opportunities that directly contribute to employability and employment outcomes. The standard of living in Australia is high and the unique natural environment is also attractive to students. Australia's successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, while having had a devastating impact on the international education sector, is still a pull factor for international students.

ii. How do we offer an Australian education experience while complementing the value of Australian offshore and online education?

Some ways of achieving this include:

- Strengthened alumni networks (for networking and social engagement);
 - Multi-national industry partnerships (for work integrated learning/internships/graduate employment programs); and
 - Offshore university partnerships (for some form of face to face classroom engagement and interaction). These should be leveraged to deliver a version of the Australian experience that is attractive to students.
-

7. Community support for the international education sector is important for the sector's social licence. How can the benefits this sector provides to Australia be better understood by wider community?

One way of enhancing community understanding of the value of international education and the broader benefits it brings to Australian communities is for **government-funded public campaigns** which highlight:

- The financial/revenue-based outcomes of the sector and the ripple effect it has on other sectors of the economy such as the housing, tourism, retail and hospitality industries. While these benefits are clear to those working in the sector, they are arguably very opaque for the broader population. For instance, in Victoria, few Victorians would be aware that international education is the state's largest export service.
- Local employment outcomes i.e. the number of Australian jobs supported by the International Education Sector

- Investments in education services and the community that are derived from international education; and
- Soft diplomacy and cross-cultural engagement /development within our communities.

While public campaigns as outlined above would be beneficial, one key factor for the sector's social licence is the narrative (including from government sources) on international matters. It is an open secret that in the past few years, there has been an increased awareness and focus on the risk of foreign interference and foreign influence in Australia and in Australian universities in particular. The focus, which has led to a whole new edifice of legislation to combat emerging threats to Australian national security, is justified to match the increased risk. However, it is important to distinguish between the actions of governments and those of their civilian populations. This is important not only in terms of the actions taken but also in terms of the rhetoric surrounding Australia's reactions and plans to combat any national security risk. Unless carefully phrased and communicated, for the wider public, issues often become interlaced and the presence of international students in Australia on their own steam to further their own education, becomes equated to the actions of the government of the country they are from. In short, if for instance the government of Country X is being officially criticised from Australian government sources, it is more likely that the wider public in general may express hostility to students from that country.

Similarly, as outlined in Question 1, although it is acknowledged that diversification of source countries away from China and India would be beneficial for the international education sector (as it would be for other sectors of the economy in the case of China), we would caution against a narrative or implication that there is a problem with having too many students from one country. If the government deems that there are too many international students in Australia, or too many international students from one particular country – a view which we strongly rebut - then it should manage its student visa program accordingly – rather than engaging in a public criticism of universities for enrolling too many international students or too many from a single country.

In short, we believe that government and community leaders (at all levels), should lead by example in terms of underlining at each and every opportunity the multi-faceted benefits of international education including the crucial importance of the sector to the Australian economy as well as to the vast cultural and societal benefits derived from international exchange of people and ideas.

8. What else should the Council for International Education and the Australian Government consider in developing the new Strategy?

La Trobe recommends that the following points should be considered in developing the new strategy:

- Onshore student return and delivery should continue to be a significant component of the strategy; and
- Innovation through digitisation and online delivery is good in theory but based on the direct experience of universities, and feedback from our international students, there should be a clear emphasis on the recovery from COVID-19 and the continuity of onshore international education.